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Mediation's Potential to Reduce Occupational Stress: A New Perspective

This article is a response to several factors: the emergence of occupational stress as a main theme in a qualitative study involving parties to workplace mediation; the recognition that mediation, being underpinned by psychological stress models, can reduce occupational stress; and a lack of studies investigating mediation's potential to alleviate occupational stress. Linking mediation's main qualities to interactional and transactional models of stress, the article provides a new angle on mediation's dynamics. Findings are illustrated by extracts from interviews undertaken. Suggestions are made as to ways in which workplace mediation might be used more pro-actively in relation to stress.

Introduction

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The benefits of workplace mediation can be far-reaching, since it often leads to positive changes in working relationships, immediate renewal of performance, and improvement of morale (Dolder, 2004; Doherty and Guyler, 2008). Additionally, at the organizational level mediation can help create a problem-solving culture and improve the emotional health of the organization (Doherty and Guyler, 2008; Bollen and Euwema, 2013). This appears to be achieved in part by reducing occupational stress, an advantage of the process that is unexplored in the literature.

Acknowledging the importance of filling in this gap, the present article examines mediation's stress alleviating potential and links the processes taking place in mediation to psychological models of stress. By establishing this previously unexplained connection, the article examines mediation's dynamics from a new perspective. It argues that mediation can intervene at the root of the stress process and prompt significant positive changes, potentially with long term stress-reducing effect at the level of the individual and the organization.

Psychological knowledge of stress and its links to mediation can enhance the ways in which mediators and organizations might best use this tool to achieve wide-ranging benefits. Importantly, it is not argued that mediation can or should substitute for counseling, a frequently applied organizational stress management intervention (O'Driscoll and Cooper, 2002; Kinman and Jones, 2005), or other forms of individual interventions if they are necessary or more appropriate. Rather, it is claimed that mediation could serve as an additional

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instrument to keep occupational stress at bay and have a more significant place in the system of stress management interventions.

Occupational stress and mediation

Occupational stress places significant burdens on organizational functioning and individual well-being. Numerous employees face working environments that, for one reason or another, pose what may feel like insurmountable challenges or difficulties placing them in untenable positions often leading to physical symptoms (for example, Nixon and others, 2011). The American Institute of Stress reports that the estimated cost of occupational stress to the United States economy is over \$300 billion annually, which is the result of various consequences of stress, for example, absenteeism, employee turnover, lowered productivity or compensation awards (American Institute of Stress, n.d.). Similarly, in Great Britain, stress has consistently been one of the most common types of work-related illnesses (UK, Health and Safety Executive (HSE), 2013). Stress being the prevalent condition in 40% of a total of 1 073 000 cases for all work-related illnesses, occupational stress caused workers in Great Britain to lose 10.4 million working days in 2011/12 (UK, Health and Safety Executive, 2013). As demonstrated in numerous studies, stress at work is a common

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phenomenon in most countries (World Health Organization, n.d.; Zellars and others, 2008).

Agencies offering alternative dispute resolution services also address issues of occupational stress. In the US, the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service offers training in conflict resolution, which is promoted as leading to less stress, more harmony and heightened performance (Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service, n.d.). This service also offers workshops that are explicitly targeted at creating a healthy workplace (Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service, 2011). Likewise, in the UK, the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) has developed training programs for organizations such as “Managing stress in the workplace” and “Toxic workplace cultures-how to tackle them” (Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service, n.d.). In Australia, the Fair Work Commission, the national workplace relations tribunal, can issue orders to stop bullying behavior, a distinct risk to health and cause of stress (Fair Work Commission, 2014). These services acknowledge the relationship between conflict and stress at work, which suggests that mediation, being a form of interest based conflict resolution, may have potential to reduce occupational stress.

Conflict can be caused by various factors and become highly distressing (for example, Beer and Packard, 2012) leading to deteriorated health, psychosomatic complaints and burnout (De Dreu, 2008). This article argues that mediation can have a secondary beneficial effect of reducing occupational stress

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when it addresses underlying factors in the conflict, a main characteristic of mediation (for example, Silbey and Merry, 1986), these factors being building blocks in psychological models of stress. Specifically, this article demonstrates that stress can be reduced via the main processes taking place in mediation when alleviating conflict, that is, through i) enhanced and facilitated communication, ii) reappraisal, iii) problem-solving, and iv) positive change in parties' relationship.

The first section provides a brief overview of factors that contribute to the occurrence of occupational stress as explained in psychological stress models. The second section moves on to assess the main features and mechanisms of mediation, as well as the psychological basis of mediation's potential to deal with stressors through these mechanisms. The third section portrays and confirms mediation's impact presenting two cases for analysis from my own qualitative study on the lived experiences of parties to workplace mediation. Finally, the article considers ways to apply mediation in order to target and reduce stressors at work more effectively.

Definitions and models of occupational stress

The "Stress at Work" booklet, issued by ACAS lists the six main organizational stressors identified by the HSE in the UK, as demand, control, support, relationships, roles, and change (Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service, 2009). These stressors, and stress as a process, have been considered from different perspectives by major theories and models of occupational stress.

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In order to explore the potential impact of mediation on occupational stress in its complexity, following the approach of Cooper, Dewe and O'Driscoll (2001), this article adopts conceptualizations of stress based on interactional and transactional models of stress, these being the two major approaches to the phenomenon established in the literature. Interactional stress models focus on the structural characteristic of the stress process, that is, the impact of environmental factors on the individual, while transactional models of stress concentrate on the emotional and mental processes in the background of stress and the dynamic relationship between the individual and the environment (Cooper, Dewe and O'Driscoll, 2001; Mark and Smith, 2008).

Interactional models of stress

In these models, occupational stress is considered to be the consequence of the interaction between environmental factors and the individual, which are viewed as the central features of stress in any job (Ivancevich, Matteson and Preston, 1982). The idea of this interaction is incorporated in the theory of person-environment fit (PE-fit) (Lofquist and Dawis, 1969), and these models share the feature of examining the P and E components along different dimensions (Caplan, 1987). PE-fit theory posits that when a job produces pressures in the work environment that surpass the skills and abilities of the employee, or when the job demands are in conflict with the values and objectives of the employee,

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the lack of fit results in strain (that is, psychological, physical and behavioral reactions to stressors), which in turn may lead to burnout, absenteeism and health-related problems (Spielberger, Vagg, Wasala, 2003).

Another model is the “effort-reward imbalance” (ERI) model of Siegrist (1996), which considers monetary remuneration, social approval (esteem), control of occupational status (such as, career opportunities, job security, occupational change) as “reward”, while as “efforts” it includes both intrinsic efforts (for example, overcommitment) and extrinsic demands (for example, workload) (Siegrist and others, 1992; Peter and Siegrist, 1999). In the ERI model high effort/ low-reward conditions are stipulated as stressors (Siegrist, 1991).

A model of high complexity is the “job demands-resources” (JD-R) model (Bakker and Demerouti, 2006) which predominantly builds on Karasek’s (1979) model of job demands and control, and its extension, the “demand-control-support” model of Johnson and Hall (1988). The JD-R model posits that although occupations vary in their characteristics associated with stress, it is possible to model these in the categories of “demands” and “resources” (Bakker, Demerouti and Verbeke, 2004). Job demands include psychological, physical, social or organizational aspects of the job that require effort or skills to manage them, and are associated with psychological and/or physiological costs. Resources cover all aspects of the job that assist the individual to accomplish work goals, reduce job demands and related costs, or stimulate personal growth and development (Demerouti and others, 2001; Bakker and others, 2003).

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Examples of demands are high work pressure, unfavorable environmental conditions and emotionally demanding interaction with clients, while examples of job resources are participation in decision making, autonomy, social support, team climate, performance feedback, or financial rewards (Bakker, Demerouti and Verbeke, 2004). At the heart of the model lies the assumption that work characteristics may evoke two different processes (Bakker and others, 2003; Bakker and Demerouti, 2006). First, a health impairment process which starts with high demands that exhaust individuals' mental and physical resources, and may lead to exhaustion and health problems (Bakker and others, 2003). Second, a process motivational in nature whereby poor job resources preclude goal accomplishment, which may cause failure and frustration leading to lowered commitment (Bakker and others, 2003). Additionally, the model proposes that the interaction of high job demands and poor resources is important for the development of strain, and job resources have the potential to buffer the impact of high job demands on stress reactions (Demerouti and others, 2001).

The separate constructs explained by these models are likely to surface in workplace mediation. Hence, the ways in which mediation deals with these constructs deserve attention when mediation's stress-releasing potentials are investigated.

Transactional models of stress

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Transactional models, of which Lazarus and Folkman's is the most influential, focus on the dynamics of cognitive processes behind the interaction of the individual and the environment (Folkman and others, 1986b; Lazarus and Folkman, 1987). Central to the model is the process of cognitive appraisal (Lazarus, 1991), which offers insights into how individuals subjectively perceive their environments giving rise to emotions and reactions to events (Yap and Tong, 2009). The model suggests that cognitive appraisal determines if an event is experienced as stressful and examines "primary appraisal" (perceived meaning and significance of events to self as positive, irrelevant or negative), "secondary appraisal" (evaluations of the individual's ability to deal with the event perceived as challenge, threat or harm), and finally the "reappraisal" (re-evaluation of the situation and the invested efforts) (Lazarus, 1984; Lazarus, 1991). Appraisal informs "coping", that is, cognitive or behavioral efforts to manage stress or conflict (Folkman and Lazarus, 1985). As two conceptually distinguishable strategies, the model proposes "emotion-focused coping" (efforts to regulate stressful emotions) and "problem-focused coping" (efforts to remove the stressor or diminish its impact), which, however, are used together by individuals at each stressful event (Folkman and others, 1986a; Lazarus, 2000). Coping approaches include planning and taking action, distancing, seeking social support, accepting responsibility and positive reappraisal (Lazarus and Folkman, 1987).

Lazarus (1991) claims that causes and sources of stress, as well as ways of coping, vary among individuals. In addition, coping is not a static process, it

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changes during a stressful encounter and across encounters (Lazarus and Folkman, 1987). Thus, understanding what is stressful requires an exploration of processes at the intra-individual and inter-individual level (Lazarus, 1991). This allows transactional approaches to observe stress in its complexity, contributing to their importance when exploring mediation's potentials to intervene in the process of stress.

Perceived organizational injustice as stressor

Although it is not a distinct model of occupational stress, the idea of “organizational justice” deserves some attention here, since studies indicate that individual employees’ perceptions of organizational justice have a significant impact on their behavior and well-being at work (Greenberg, 1990; Elovainio, Kivimaki and Vahtera, 2002).

Jones (2009) identifies a four dimensional structure of justice at work comprising distributive justice (the fairness of the outcome the individual perceives), procedural justice (the procedures used to determine the outcomes), and interactional justice (the individual’s treatment by authorities or management) with subgroups of interpersonal justice (referring to being treated with dignity and sensitivity) and informational justice (referring to perceived adequacy of explanations provided by the management about procedures and outcomes). Distributive, procedural and interactional justice are all unique predictors of strain (Tepper 2000; Francis and Barling, 2005), with procedural justice having

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the strongest effect (Tepper, 2001). Additionally, procedural and interpersonal justice are intertwined as preconditions for evaluating organizational practices, and such evaluation is strongly related to the quality of employee-management relationships (Elovainio, Kivimaki and Helkama, 2001). This connects procedural and interpersonal justice to interpersonal relationship as a stressor (Judge and Colquitt, 2004).

Organizational change as stressor

Similarly, organizational change (for example, mergers and acquisitions) is also a commonly cited cause of stress (Ross and Altmaier, 1994; Cartwright and Cooper, 1997; Cohen and others, 2006). Organizational changes have the potential to bring about economic and power issues, cultural changes, and anxiety about individual compensation and distribution of organizational resources (Cartwright and Cooper, 1997; Cohen and others, 2006), which are significant sources of strain.

Understanding the potential of workplace mediation as a stress-reducing strategy

The definition and qualities of mediation

A detailed definition of the process tailored to workplace mediation is that of Doherty and Guyler (2008) who claim that “an impartial mediator facilitates

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communication between those in dispute in order for them to understand each other better and for them to come up with mutually acceptable solutions that will improve the working relationship in the future” (7). This definition presents the main processes taking place in mediation, such as, facilitated communication, heightened understanding potentially associated with reappraisal, creative problem-solving and relationship improvement.

It is commonly claimed that mediation induces constructive communication to increase understanding of different perspectives and hidden needs (for example, Beer and Stief, 1997; Kovach and Love, 1998) and such process of learning facilitates reappraisal (Picard and Siltanen, 2013). These, along with creative problem-solving are considered vital to parties’ coming to a mutually satisfying agreement (Liebmann, 2000). Furthermore, it is frequently argued that mediation has the potential to improve parties’ relationships (for example, Stallworth, McPherson and Rute, 2001; Craig, 2008). Being the main mechanisms to alleviate conflict, it appears that these processes serve also as the channels through which mediation can address stressors.

Communication as a tool for stress-reduction

One of mediation’s commonly identified benefits is the improvement of communication quality between parties (for example, Saundry, Bennett and Wibberley, 2013). Parties who are in mediation will generally not have been and

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are not communicating well, since they are often under the influence of powerful negative emotions (Bennett and Hughes, 2005). Mediation provides participants with an opportunity to engage in and experience a different kind of conversation. Mediators in hostile exchanges look for building blocks of constructive communication, extracting and encouraging focus on meaning that would not necessarily be apparent to an untrained listener (Love, 2000). As building blocks, interests, feelings, principles, values, issues, proposals, best and worst alternatives to a negotiated agreement (BATNAs and WATNAs) are explored, which remain hidden in confrontational interactions (Kovach and Love, 1998; Love, 2000).

Central to communication in mediation is active listening, a major tool of the mediator, which allows parties to feel deeply heard (Phillips, 1999; Barton, 2005). This experience helps parties to process information mentally and emotionally (Doherty and Guyler, 2008), which is commonly cited as putting parties in a calmer mood reducing stress (Retzinger and Scheff, 2000; Schreier, 2002; Picard and Jull, 2011).

Extending beyond this “rapid” stress releasing benefit of mediation, this article argues that from the perspective of interactional stress models mediation’s approach to communication has potential to reduce stress, since when parties work on understanding the issues and interests underlying their conflict, stressors discussed in interactional stress models are often dealt with. Uncovering specific interests, needs or values of major significance to each party and the organization,

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parties gain insight into questions of value congruence and need fulfillment, the main factors in PE-fit models of stress as explained by Greguras and Diefendorff (2009). Based on these factors, incompatibilities described in PE-fit models as main stressors, for example, misfit of person-organization, person-supervisor or job demands-abilities (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman and Johnson, 2005), may be revealed in mediation. Also, perceptions of failed reciprocity manifesting in high job pressure and low esteem, financial gains or career opportunities described by the ERI model as main source of strain (Feuerhahn, Kühnel and Kudielka, 2012), can be revealed in the conversation facilitated by the mediator. Parties' excessive work related commitment and high need for approval ("overcommitment"), a supplementary component of the ERI model that places the individual to increased risk of strain from non-symmetric exchange (Siegrist and others, 2004), may be uncovered in the background of conflict as well.

Further, parties disclosing issues ("distinct and negotiable matters or behaviors that are frustrating a party's agenda", Love, 2000, 31) are likely to address job demands and resources as outlined by the JD-R model, since this model covers a wide array of factors that lead to strain. Some issues will fall in the category of job resources that are instrumental in achieving work goals. For example, unfulfilled need for security, relatedness, competence, or reputation, will be associated with job resources that fulfill basic human needs and play an intrinsic motivational role as explained by Bakker and Demerouti (2006). Job resources in this category include proper feedback, social support or decision

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latitude (Bakker and Demerouti, 2006). Similarly, it is plausible that parties gain understanding of the conflict as being centered on perceptions of organizational injustice or issues related to organizational change. When any of these stressors surface they can be articulated by the mediator and submitted to facilitated in-depth exploration, which may not be possible without a safe space, a main characteristic and benefit of mediation (Schreier, 2002; Saundry, Bennett and Wibberley, 2013).

Also, stress is essentially multifactorial, which requires the consideration of the interplay of several factors characterizing the interaction of a particular individual with the environment. Since in mediation individual and specific issues can be dealt with, and the outcomes are tailored to the parties (for example, Kovach and Love, 1998), the process provides ideal opportunity to identify multiple issues that trigger strain for a particular party. Additionally, building their own settlement reinstates parties' sense of control over their issues acting against lack of control, a stressor included in the JD-R model (Bakker and others, 2003).

Reappraisal in mediation to reduce stress

Safe space in mediation offers optimal opportunities for reappraisal leading to a shift in the perception held of the other party and of the dispute. Essential to this process are the mediator's using a mix of open and closed questions, effective listening, acknowledgements, paraphrases and reframes that elicit learning about

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the parties' needs and perspectives (Lewis, 2009), stimulating transformation in the appraisal of the situation (Picard and Siltanen, 2013). Reappraisal of the issues that parties identify as stressors is a further channel for mediation's intervention in the process of stress.

From this aspect mediation operates in line with the transactional strategy to reduce stress as explained by Lazarus (1991). That is, it seeks to identify the dynamic nature of the relationship of the individual(s) with the other individual(s) or the work setting, and attempts to change this relationship by altering mental and emotional processes operating between the two sides. When in mediation parties observe their behavior, interactions and their perceptual world influencing these (for example, Folberg and Taylor, 1984), they engage in mental and emotional work targeting each phase of the process of appraisals as described by Folkman and others (1986a). Parties explore their perceptions of the factors they consider significant in the conflict (their primary appraisals), in what ways these issues are being dealt with (their secondary appraisals), and the suitability of the approach taken. If parties identify threat (potential for harm) or harm (loss already suffered), considered as stressful primary appraisals in transactional stress models (for example, Folkman, 1984), the mediator assists them to re-examine these perceptions from different perspectives, thus facilitating reappraisal.

This process of reappraisal in mediation involves working with emotions. Since emotional experience is an integral part of conflict dynamics and it can

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distort parties' interpretations making the "reality" invisible (Maiese, 2006), awareness of emotions, underlying concerns and the explicit negotiation of these are ways to further parties' negotiation goals (Shapiro, 2002). Therefore, in line with the transactional approach to stress, which considers emotions as important correlates of appraisal (Lazarus, 1991), when inducing reappraisal mediators include emotions in the negotiation instead of engaging in exclusively rational problem-solving (Retzinger and Scheff, 2000).

In mediation, changes in primary appraisal can result in the reconsideration of the applied coping strategies and the selection of mechanisms that will fit in with the parties' newly gained perceptions (secondary appraisal). Via facilitating alteration in the appraisal of, and methods of coping with the identified stressors, mediation has potential to have a positive influence in relation to the stress process as depicted in transactional stress models.

Problem-solving as a tool to reduce stress

Problem-solving in mediation relies on facilitated communication and the reappraisal of the circumstances. The mediator assists parties to generate a range of possible solutions with the aim of creatively expanding their available options and moving from blame to the generation of breakthrough ideas (Kovach and Love, 1998; Bennett and Hughes, 2005). The strategies and tools applied are guided by the mediator's true faith in the parties' knowledge and capability to

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face and resolve their disagreements with the assistance of the mediator (Beer and Stief, 1997).

From the aspect of interactional stress models, creative problem-solving is applied in mediation in order to deal with circumstances experienced as stressors identified in these models. When in the course of reappraisal discrepancy remains between the person (abilities, needs) and environment (demands, supplies) components of PE-fit models, and in facilitated conversation the nature of the discrepancy becomes properly understood, modifications can be made in these components to improve fit. Such modifications may take various forms including training the individual, changes in feedback methods or restructuring to better use existing human resources (Caplan, 1987). Similarly, when stress is recognized to be the result of high effort/low-reward conditions described by the ERI model, the imbalance between job demands and job resources explained in the JD-R model, organizational injustice or change, these dimensions need to be addressed. Interventions to be decided upon may target, for example, shift work, overtime, increased workload due to shortage of labor force (Siegrist, 1996), job control (autonomy), instrumental and social support (Demerouti and others, 2000). Mediation has potential to assist the selection of the most appropriate intervention, as it involves parties engaging in cooperative interest-based negotiation (for example, Beer and Packard, 2012), and discovery of superordinate values and mutual goals leading to both tangible and intangible results (Wildau, 1987).

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Additionally, in case subsequent to mediation intervention in order to address the identified stressors is not feasible due to organizational circumstances, mediation itself can lower stress levels by facilitating circumstances that buffer against job strain. These include articulating the presence of the stressor leading to experiences of predictability, clarifying the reasons for the presence of the stressor, or achieving controllability in relation to the stressor (for example, via job autonomy) (Bakker and Demerouti, 2006).

While interactional stress models highlight stressors that may be addressed, transactional stress models offer a complementary perspective on problem-solving in mediation as a way to alleviate stress revolving around the shift towards active coping strategies. From this viewpoint the mediator's sincere confidence in the process and in the parties' capability to resolve the conflict, as well as genuine encouragement, help parties to face challenging issues (Beer and Stief, 1997) and feel empowered to bring important decisions (Boon, Urwin and Karuk, 2011). The mediator encourages problem-focused coping, a strategy more frequently applied by individuals who experience their circumstances as changeable (Folkman and Lazarus, 1985). In turn, realization of new ways of coping and the changeability of the situation will lead to perceptions of diminished threat resulting in lowered stress levels as explained in the transactional models (Folkman and Lazarus, 1985). This effect is further supported by research findings on occupational stress which demonstrate that individuals who engage in direct coping (that is, active problem-focused

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behavioral strategies to deal with stressors) show lower levels of stress, regardless of high levels of workload and low levels of work support (Dijkstra, Beersma and Cornelissen, 2012; Parkes, 1990). Similarly, in relation to conflict, it has been found that active coping through problem-solving weakens the conflict-strain relationship (Dijkstra, Beersma and Evers, 2011). The ARCAS model (activity reduces conflict-associated strain) developed by Dijkstra, Beersma and Cornelissen (2012) identifies several moderators that reduce the strain of workplace conflict, all of which encourage active rather than passive conflict management (Dijkstra, Beersma and Cornelissen, 2012).

Overall, the stress relieving potentials of mediation via problem-solving appears to be twofold. First, through problem-solving the most appropriate intervention can be found for stressors explained in interactional stress models. Second, it can be argued that mediation can ease occupational stress by prompting problem-focused and direct coping strategies, which have been found to reduce strain (for example, Dijkstra, Beersma and Evers, 2011).

Relationship change and the reduction of occupational stress

Mediation's aspirations may include the objective of generating improvement in parties' relationships, extending beyond signing an agreement as an aim (Mareschal, 2002; Greig, 2005; Doherty and Guyler, 2008). This goal is a particular feature of workplace mediation, since in this context parties tend to be involved in an on-going relationship (Mareschal, 2002). Although in an ACAS

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research paper Saundry, Bennett and Wibberley (2013) reported that achieving resolution in workplace mediation did not always involve or result in significant behavioral and relationship change, relationship improvement not only as an aim but as a major benefit of the process is frequently cited by organizations and parties to mediation (UK, Chartered Institute of Policy Development, 2008; Craig, 2008; Bennett, 2012). These statements are vital when mediation's stress alleviating potentials are investigated, since interpersonal conflict is experienced by individuals in various occupations and at different organizational levels as the most potent stressor at work (Folberg and Taylor, 1984; Bolger and others; 1989; Dijkstra, Beersma and Cornelissen, 2012)

Problematic relationships as a stressor emerge in the form of injustice perceptions and in interactional stress models in numerous ways, which underlines the potency of this stressor. In PE-fit models relationship breakdown may manifest as interpersonal incompatibility between individuals (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman and Johnson, 2005), while the ERI-model highlights lack of acceptance and appreciation as part of feeling unrewarded (Siegrist and others, 2004), and the JD-R model lists unsupportive colleagues or supervisors, malevolent team climate and inappropriate interpersonal treatment (Demerouti and others, 2001). These all refer to relationships, directly or indirectly, as a stressor. When in mediation parties elaborate on these issues and aim at changing these stressors, they work on improving their relationship and lowering stress levels simultaneously.

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As for the process of such change, a different mode of communication in mediation, and reappraisal facilitated by the mediator appear to be key. Parties to workplace mediation reported that changes in relationship were possible because mediation had presented them with a different perspective on their issues, and separated the individuals from the problem; opened a completely new world, a new system of how things work; and revealed how the other party was feeling and thinking about the issues in question (Hoskins and Stoltz, 2003).

Given that the literature suggests that mediation has the potential to prompt positive changes in relationships, the process is likely to alleviate occupational stress also via targeting this major workplace stressor. Since most research projects are conducted by mediation service providers or policy makers, scholars repeatedly call for further empirical studies, and emphasize the great need for qualitative studies that provide rich and in-depth examination of parties' views of mediation and its effects on their relationships (Hoskins and Stoltz, 2003; Wall and Dunne, 2012; Bollen and Euwema, 2013). My research study, discussed below, illustrates and further supports the potential of mediation in this regard.

Extracts from an interview study confirming mediation's potentials to alleviate stress

Semi-structured interviews with parties to workplace mediation conducted in the UK highlighted stress as a significant experience of participants. The interviews

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were carried out for a qualitative study on the lived experiences of parties to workplace mediation applying interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), a methodology that reifies personal experiences (Smith and Osborn, 2008). IPA uses small samples and an in-depth analysis of each interview with the aim of investigating how individuals make sense of their world, what meanings they attribute to events, states, as well as experiences (Smith and Osborn, 2008).

Two analyses are presented below in support of the argument that mediation has the potential to reduce occupational stress addressing stressors. The extracts use pseudonyms. Further, in order to maintain the richness of the accounts, the extracts are presented as transcript, including pauses and utterances such as repetitions, repairs, false starts and conversation fillers.

The first is the case of Linda, an employee between twenty-five and thirty-five years of age employed in an outdoors occupation by a public organization in England. Linda participated in workplace mediation with a supervisor, Darren, she had been close friends with prior to their conflict. The analysis of Linda's account features "experiences of stress" as a super-ordinate theme, which manifests as a sudden and eruptive change from closeness and belonging to complete relationship breakdown escalating to bullying. Reflecting on her experience, Linda makes sense of the relationship breakdown as experiencing "no speaking, no nothing". The switch from daily communication with Darren, to whom she was close, to a lack of interaction, brought about a threatening and tense working atmosphere. Linda depicts entering the workplace

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as “gut-wrenching” and describes this feeling via comparing herself to her child self, crying at home and not wanting to go to school. This metaphor highlights vividly the extent of her experienced vulnerability in a distressing work environment.

L: You’d just get like you you’d walk in here
[pause] or you’d get out of your car and
you’d just have that gut-wrenching feeling
like “I really don’t wanna go” I felt like I was
at school I used to cry to my mom and say
“I’m not going I don’t wanna go” but on the
days he wasn’t here I always wanted to come.
But on the days I knew I was working with
him or he’d be here you just wouldn’t wanna
come to work (L: 311-317)

Linda portrays Darren’s abuse of power during the conflict as interpersonal and procedural injustice (for example, Judge and Colquitt, 2004). These were forms of bullying behavior that Linda experienced as major stressors entwined with relationship breakdown. For Linda, bullying amongst others manifested in name calling and negative verbal behavior (interpersonal injustice), as well as discriminatory actions against her (procedural injustice). As for the

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latter, Linda experienced unfair allocation of work when Darren assigned her to work more frequently in potentially more dangerous areas than other colleagues. Such discriminatory actions made Linda's working days highly distressing, which she describes as a "nightmare". Linda in the face of threat engaged in self-defence, documenting procedural injustice and giving voice to her complaints to the management as unfair treatment.

L:...he always used to put me in areas that were maybe more volatile and erm areas where he might only go once once every three weeks I will go in twice a week to these areas. So it did impact me and like I'd take photographs of the board and I'd write it down and I'd show the management and I'd say "This ain't fair, this ain't right"... (L: 408-413)

Over the interview as a whole, Linda described experiencing stress as a result of the conflict in various ways: i) via her intonation when speaking about the conflict; ii) by explicitly stating that stress was a difficult experience; and iii) by stating that without mediation one of the parties would have fallen sick. For

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Linda, mediation had a strong protective feature preventing physical breakdown or layoff.

Interviewer: All in all how would you describe mediation as an experience for you?

L: Erm I'd say it was a worthwhile experience for me erm and it was it was necessary for me and without it I think one of us would have ended up getting sacked being on sick or leave having to leave because it was really important for me really (L: 975-980)

As for the processes taking place in mediation, Linda discloses that in the joint session the mediator encouraged and facilitated conversation about the issues in the background of the conflict. The mediator provided safe space for a heated and open conversation, which resulted in reappraisal. The issues covered included bullying and injustice as perceived by Linda and the impact of these stressors on her, as well as Darren's perceptions of Linda's negative behavior and its effect on him. A positive spiral was created in communication in the framework of which Darren's acceptance of his faults and responsibility for the

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conflict induced Linda's reappraisal of the situation and subsequent behavioral change.

L:...I'd literally write down anything and everything he'd done to me when I'd been in and what had happened and I could justify the things he was accusing me of I could justify and say "No that that's not how it happened" or "That's not what was said" and it sort of like brought his guard down a bit and erm he like admitted he was sorry and his faults and the way he'd gone about things but then he said to me [pause] "The way you spoke to me on this day" and I believed I didn't but then he said "If you ask other people how you were" and knowing myself I probably was a little bit short with him... (L: 689-699)

Overall, in this case the positive spiral created via facilitated conversation promoted major alterations in the parties' behavior and thinking resulting in a relationship of different quality. Linda, after some hesitation,

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articulates that the process helped them not only to reinstate their relationship, but also to elicit improvement.

L:...and that is how it is now it's not like it used to be but it's it's b' it's it's better actually it's made our friendship stronger to be honest mediation (L:578-580)

Mediation eased stress via resolving the relationship conflict, which for Linda manifests as “relief”. Moreover, mediation’s impact was powerful enough to outweigh the negative experience of learning about the negative contributions of others to the escalation of the dispute.

Interviewer: When the session ended how did you feel about the situation right there?

L: Erm relief

Interviewer: Relief uhum

L: Just relief erm and I felt [pause] like I said I felt a little bit annoyed with other people but yeah I felt [pause] relief just (L: 741-746)

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Alongside mediation reducing the stress associated with relationship breakdown, conflict escalation prompted managerial interventions that resulted in organizational changes addressing injustice. Linda explains that due to the changes introduced in supervision and division of tasks the system has become “fair”, positively affecting all colleagues and the whole working environment. Linda’s account highlights the joint positive effect of mediation and managerial interventions on organizational climate, and the importance of actions taken by management targeting the stressors uncovered.

L:...now they had they had two separate supervisors not these two erm two supervisors that are fair with everybody they do a six-week rota now and it’s all fair and it’s all consistent and everybody’s happy now
(L: 413-416)

“Stress as a main experience” manifests as a super-ordinate theme also in the account of another interviewee, Bob, a middle-aged employee of a public organization in England. Bob participated in mediation in order to resolve his long term conflict with his subordinate, Helen. A major stressor for Bob was Helen’s behavior and actions towards him and other work colleagues, which manifested in ostracism, avoidance, creation of alliances and manipulation of the

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management. Bob, considering his role, sought to protect his subordinates from the negative behavior of Helen and her allies. This endeavor became a mission for Bob during the conflict.

B: I was protecting those and I was trying to keep them in the job because they both said to me if I wasn't here they wouldn't be here they'd put the ticket in and go erm so I I thought this isn't this isn't right so I I sectioned off with those and because I sectioned off with those I then got ostracized and they do they do things like erm going to Sam all the time the other [employee in an equivalent position] when she is on my team she should come to me and ask me things...

(B: 379-388)

Bob invested enormous efforts in completing his work tasks to high standards as well as dealing with the conflict, and felt that he had received no support from the management. Additionally, learning about the possibility of being laid-off further increased his experiences of stress. These circumstances indicate the presence of effort-reward imbalance for Bob, depicted in the ERI-

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model as source of stress. Job insecurity, as part of such imbalance, entwined with interpersonal conflict was the “final straw” resulting in Bob’s breakdown.

B: And then the final straw that broke the camel’s back was I am erm hearing that people in the office who are union reps erm are wanting and discussing it through the unions about do it cause we’re we’re at a stage where we’ve we’ve got cuts to be made and they’re looking at our role now they want to get rid of it... (B:237-243)

Due to the complex situation and lack of managerial interventions, Bob increasingly felt reluctant about and incapable of handling the ongoing clashes and disagreements in the office. He showed symptoms of stress and went on sickness leave due to stress.

B: ...I’d had enough I was stressed up I couldn’t sleep at night thinking about you know situation in the office and [clears throat] to be honest not wanting to come into the office ... (B: 1140-1144)

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Bob's major experience of mediation lies in the nature of facilitated conversation whereby parties could "get things out in the open". The conversation centered on the parties' perceptions of the relationship breakdown and the factors underlying this. Bob experiences mediation as a catalyst that set the parties in motion leading to a "peak" where changes were possible, resulting in the reappraisal of the situation. Reappraisal manifested in Helen's shift from denial to acceptance and Bob's heightened openness towards Helen.

B:... then it got to a peak where she like started accepting things and then it came down the other side where it was "oh yeah I understand yeah I agree" and then the result is when we walked out erm I I just said to her "look I don't understand what happened between you and me Helen 'cause we've actually worked well together and we've we've actually when we've been working we've gone out for lunch together" (B: 532-540)

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Though mediation did not bring about a major transformation in the relationship of Helen and the team, or prompt concrete managerial interventions, it did result in improvement in Helen and Bob's working relationship. Following weeks without interactions, communication was reinstated between the parties leading to working conditions that enabled Bob to return to work.

B:...mediation actually helped her as well as
it helped me it got us now where we come in
on a morning and "hello Helen how are you
doing?" and we're talking and and "where
are you going on your holidays? oh what
were you doing this weekend?" and we're
actually talking now...(B: 582-587)

Such improvements flowing from mediation induced reduction in the levels of stress experienced, and the restoration of Bob's energy levels. All this made the process a "worthwhile experience" for Bob.

B: Well now I'll you know get up on a
morning and I can I can sleep at night it's
helped me in that respect... (B: 1197-1999)

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The cases discussed confirm and support the idea that mediation has significant potential to lead to the reduction of occupational stress via addressing malfunctioning relationship and entwined factors as major stressors. In consequence, it can be concluded that mediation can facilitate a more positive working climate, lower absenteeism, or in less ideal scenarios promote improved organizational climate and assist individuals to cope with them. It should be noted, however, that the success of the process depends heavily on a number of factors commonly referred to in the literature, including the openness and readiness of the parties to mediation, as well as the approach and skills of the mediator (for example, Marcil and Thornton, 2008).

Implications for practice

By seeking to demonstrate that mediation can intervene effectively in the stress process through communication, reappraisal, problem-solving and relationship change, this article argues that mediation could be applied more pro-actively in order to alleviate occupational stress in various organizational settings. Mediation, as opposed to counseling, provides a forum for interaction between individuals making their working and/or personal relationship, as well as the working atmosphere, an integral part of the context. Hence, it provides space to discover and address stressors that are particular for each individual in each setting. The evidence presented earlier indicates clearly that this enables

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organizational mediation schemes to become potentially important intervention points in relation to occupational stress, and an effective part of stress management intervention systems.

Interventions into occupational stress vary widely (Murphy, 1996), and following the typology of Quick and others (1992), may be present at three different levels: i) primary intervention aims at reducing the risk factor or change the nature of the stressor, ii) secondary intervention aims at altering the ways in which individuals respond to stress, and iii) tertiary intervention seeks to heal those who are traumatized. Based on this typology, workplace mediation, when applied in order to solve disputes, could be considered as a form of tertiary intervention having significant potential to alleviate stress alongside the conflict. As the dynamics of mediation involve working with the individual's appraisal and coping techniques, mediation is also likely to share some effects of secondary interventions. Likewise, the mediation process appears to have some of the effects of primary interventions, since via in-depth conversation in mediation stressors can be discovered that may be affecting one or a number of employees. Thus, interventions to change the stressor could take place subsequent to mediation, with organizational mediation schemes placed as the first phase of stress management interventions.

Another typology is that of DeFrank and Cooper (1987) that distinguishes among: i) stress management interventions at the individual-level (such as, lifestyle counseling, cognitive-behavioral therapy), ii) individual-

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organizational interventions that refer to targeting the interface between the individual and the organization covering role issues, P-E fit and relationships (such as, role clarification mechanisms, co-worker support groups, participatory decision making programs), and iii) organizational interventions that target the organization (such as, selection, training, job redesign, organizational restructuring). Individual level interventions are found to be the least likely to result in longer term benefits, and the use of more comprehensive strategies that include all three intervention levels is advocated (Giga and others, 2003). Although mediation intervenes at the level of the individuals concerned, it targets factors of the individual-organizational interface and has good potential to induce change at this level. Furthermore, mediation could also serve as a potentially important source of information and insight to inform organizational level interventions while maintaining confidentiality.

Increased use of mediation internally, as part of organizational procedures, via promoting knowledge and awareness of mediation amongst staff as well as making the process a preferred solution could serve as a way to reduce occupational stress. When in conflict, employees frequently report concerns that taking action, including initiating negotiations, mediation or adversarial intervention “would do more harm than good” (Jameson, 2001, 181). In addition, parties’ concern that going to a third party will cause them to be labeled as “weak” is widely referred to in the literature (for example, Jameson, 2001; Saundry, Bennett, and Wibberley, 2013). Hence, altering the perceptions of

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engagement in mediation from being symptomatic of vulnerability to being associated with control or being proactive is necessary if mediation's stress-alleviating potential is to be fully realized. Taking these measures could result in improvement of individuals' well-being at work and simultaneously increase organizational productivity via lowering organizational costs related to occupational stress.

Yet, the above is only one application of the process. It is worthwhile considering whether mediation could also be used in a more direct way to reduce occupational stress, for example, with regard to extended sickness leave due to stress. Distressed individuals could benefit from being offered the possibility of mediation to help identify stressors and promote creative problem-solving to address them. This would be an innovative application of mediation, as it does not necessarily aim at exploring a conflict, but various factors that may cause stress to the individual while maintaining the prescribed features of mediation. Such use of mediation is already present in organizational procedures in the UK (Saundry, 2012), although it remains relatively uncommon. Developing and using mediation schemes in this manner, mediation could be applied directly in order to decrease absenteeism, lost work hours, employee turnover and all costs associated to occupational stress.

Furthermore, in order to maximize mediation's stress-alleviating potentials, this article suggests that workplace mediators would benefit from training that incorporates psychological background information on occupational

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stress, including models of stress, key factors that contribute to mental health in the workplace, and development of skills and confidence to assist parties to explore and address these stressors.

Conclusion

There is a lack of existing literature exploring directly the impact of mediation on occupational stress. This article has sought to take an important step by linking mediation processes to stress-reduction strategies and offering in-depth consideration of these interconnections. It has been argued that mediation has potential to reduce occupational stress if attention is paid to individual and inter-individual psychological processes. Hence, the process could have a more significant place than at present in organizational systems of stress management interventions that not only heal but are preventative. Mediation can offer insight into processes which have negative effects on employees and managers in the organization, and can constitute a basis for positive changes at various levels of organizational functioning, including training for all levels of staff.

The critical importance of occupational stress is underlined by the emergence of stress as a main theme in the analyses of the interviews conducted with parties to workplace mediation. An emerging thought that these experiences need to be heard, explored and require proper response served as a significant motivating factor for this article. The interviews undertaken demonstrated the power of mediation to address and alleviate significant levels of occupational

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stress and quotations illustrated such impact. Further studies would be beneficial in helping to appreciate and explore mediation's potential contribution to alleviate stress in the workplace, a valuable theme as established by this article.

Importantly, occupational stress is a highly complex phenomenon to which simple solutions do not exist. Hence, this article does not seek to argue that mediation will serve as a panacea to lessen occupational stress within all organizations and on all levels. Rather, if its potential to address workplace issues is recognized and incorporated consciously into the mediation process, then mediation can make an important contribution to broader initiatives or interventions to address occupational stress and well-being in the workplace.

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